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ABSTRACT

This study examined the prevalence of bullying and victimization among Canadian school children. Using a questionnaire developed by Olweus, the study surveyed 4,743 children in grades 1 through 8. Six percent of children acknowledged bullying others "more than once or twice" in the preceding 6 weeks, and 15 percent of children reported they had been victimized at the same rate. Very few (2 percent) reported being both bullies and victims. Fourteen percent of children reported being bullied because of their race. There were significant developmental differences. With increasing age, there was an increase in the tendency to join in bullying, a decrease in willingness to help a victim, and a decrease in reports of peers assisting victims. Bullies were more likely to be known to teachers, and victims were more likely to be known to parents. The findings pose implications for intervention efforts to reduce bullying in schools. (Contains 11 references.) (EV)

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PREVALENCE OF BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION AMONG CANADIAN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the prevalence of bullying and victimization among Canadian school children. Using a questionnaire developed by Olweus, we surveyed 4,743 children in Grades 1 to 8.

6% of children acknowledged bullying others "more than once or twice" in the past six weeks and 15% of children reported they had been victimized at the same rate. Very few children (2%) reported being both bullies and victims. These figures are similar to those from other countries. 14% of children reported being bullied because of their race.

There were significant developmental differences. With increasing age, there was an increase in the tendency to join in bullying, a decrease in willingness to help a victim, and a decrease in reports of peers' assisting victims.

Bullies were more likely to be known to teachers and victims were more likely to be known to parents.

These findings are discussed in light of intervention efforts to reduce bullying in schools.

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PREVALENCE OF BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION AMONG CANADIAN ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL CHILDREN

Bullying is defined as negative actions - physical or verbal - that have hostile intent, are repeated over time, and involve a power differential (Olweus, 1991). Bullying may be direct or indirect. The latter form of bullying comprises social behaviours that covertly cause distress to a victim (e.g., gossip, spreading of rumours, encouraging others to exclude a person). The power differential in bullying may arise from differences in size and stature, but also from higher social status, a knowledge of vulnerabilities, or from the number of children colluding with the bully. Regardless of its form, the problems of bullying impact on both the bullies and their victims. For bullies, there is a risk of extending the use of power and aggression into adulthood which is manifested in criminality and other forms of antisocial behaviour (Farrington, 1993 Olweus, 1991). For victims, repeated bullying can cause significant psychological distress and interfere with many domains of functioning (Besag, 1989; Olweus, 1993).

Bullying has been extensively studied in Scandinavia since the early 1970s. In general these studies found that 15% of students reported themselves to be involved in bully/victim problems more than once or twice per term: 7% as bullies, 9% as victims, and 1% as both bullies and victims (Olweus, 1991). In Ireland, 3% of primary school children report engaging in serious bullying behaviour; 8% of children report being the victims of serious bullying (O'Moore 1989). In England, 26% of school children report being bullies "sometimes" and 15% are bullied "more often" (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). Within high schools in Britain, Yates and Smith (1989) found that 12% of students reported bullying now and then or more frequently, and 22% of students reported victimization at that rate.

To date, no large-scale North American studies of bullying and victimization have been reported. This paper compiles data from four Canadian surveys of bullying and victimization. The studies were conducted between 1991 and 1995 on a total of 4,743 children from one city and one small city in Southern Ontario. These data include reports from 588 children in primary grades (1-3), thus extending downward the age range of children who have been surveyed about bullying and victimization problems.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 4,743 children in grades 1-8 (2,336 boys and 2,407 girls) participated in the four studies reported in this paper. Descriptions of the four studies are included in Table 1. The 22 schools in the studies vary demographically, ranging from low to upper socioeconomic status and representing a wide ethnic diversity. Two of the schools were private schools, not funded by government.

Sex and grade distributions, across studies, are included in Table 2.

Measures

All children were administered a self-report Bully/Victim Questionnaire, based on Olweus (1989). This measure examines the amount of bullying and victimization that students have been directly involved in over the past six weeks, as well as their general awareness of bullying at their school. In three of the studies, additional items asked about affective and behavioural responses to bullying and the role of peer involvement.

Procedure

Questionnaires were administered individually to children in grades one and two by trained research assistants. Questionnaires were administered to children in their classroom groups for grades three through eight by at least one trained researcher. Additional support was given to any children for whom English was a second language and who experienced difficulties with the questions.

Based on the responses to the questionnaires, three subgroups of children were identified: bullies, victims, and bully-victims. These groups were compared with the overall sample on a number of questionnaire items. Children were classified as bullies if they responded "more than once or twice", or more frequently, to the question "How often have you bullied since the beginning of the school year?" Children were classified as victims if they responded "more than once or twice", or more frequently, to the question "How often have you been bullied since the beginning of the school year?" The third classification was for bully-victims which comprised of children who met the criteria for both bully and victim status.

RESULTS

Bullying

- 29.5% of children reported bullying others "one or twice", or more often, during the term.
- 6% reported bullying others "more than once or twice" during the term.
- There were no significant differences in reports of bullying across grade levels: 4.2% for primary (grades 1-3), 5.1% for junior (grades 4-6), and 7.4% for intermediate (grades 7-8).
- There were no gender differences: 6.8% of boys and 5.1% of girls acknowledged bullying others more than once or twice in the past six weeks.

Victimization

- 38% of children reported being bullied at least "once or twice" during the term; 15% reported being bullied "more than once or twice" during the term.
- Victimization decreased across grade levels: 26% of primary children reported victimization, compared to 15% of junior and 11.5% of intermediate children ($z=6.5$, $p<.05$).
- There were no gender differences in victimization.

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Peer Involvement in Bullying

- 83% of children stated that bullying made them feel either "a bit" or "quite" unpleasant.
- 31% of students indicated that they "could join in bullying someone they didn't like".
- The tendency to join in increased with grade level: primary children (13.3%) were less likely to indicate they would join in bullying than junior (31.3%) or intermediate students (49.6%)($z=7.0$, $p<.05$).
- 41% of students indicated they "do help" the victim.
- Helping victims declined with grade level: 57% of primary students, 39% of junior students, and 27% of intermediate students reported helping ($z=4.9$, $p<.05$).
- 11% of students indicated that peers "almost always" tried to stop bullying when they saw it.
- Primary children (24%) more frequently reported peer interventions than junior (11%) or intermediate children (7%) ($z=4.4$, $p<.05$).

Adult Involvement

- 29% of students indicated that teachers "almost always" intervened.
- Primary children reported a higher frequency of teacher interventions (37%) than junior (26%) and intermediate students (30%) ($z=2.5$, $p<.05$).
- 46% of bullies had spoken to their teachers and 35% of bullies had spoken to their parents about bullying.
- 41% of victims had talked with a teacher; 54% of victims had talked with their parents about problems of victimization.

Racial Bullying

- 14% of students indicated that they had been bullied "one or twice" because of their race; 5% reported being more frequent victims of racial bullying.
- There were significant differences among grade levels: primary students reported greatest racial bullying (10%), followed by junior (5%), then intermediate students (2%) ($z=2.9$, $p<.05$).

Bully-Victim Status

- 1.6% of children reported both bullying and victimization "more than once or twice".
- There were no significant grade level or gender differences in reports of bully-victim status.

DISCUSSION

Prevalence

The prevalence of bullying and victimization in Canada is similar to that from other countries. This survey of students in Grades 1 to 8 revealed that 6% of children acknowledged bullying others "more than once or twice" and 15% of children reported that they had been victimized "more than once or twice" since the beginning of term. This compares to 7% and 9% for bullies and victims in Norway (Olweus, 1991). The number of children experiencing victimization is similar to that in England (Boulton & Underwood, 1992).

Consistent with other research, rates of victimization were higher than rates of bullying. This may occur for at least two reasons. Aggressors may underestimate their involvement in bullying, while victims may be reporting on bullies who aggress against multiple targets.

Bully-Victims

Consistent with the Norwegian studies (Olweus, 1991), very few children (2%) reported that they had both bullied others and been bullied by their peers. This is inconsistent, however with our naturalistic observations of bullying on the playground. Forty-five percent of the children whom we observed bullying or being victimized, were observed in both roles (Craig & Pepler, 1997).

Racial Bullying

We were concerned about racial bullying, given the ethnic diversity in the samples from Toronto, which has been cited by the United Nations as the most ethnically diverse city in the world. One in seven children (14%) reported being bullied because of their race. Within the school system, there is a concerted effort to reduce racism. The decrease in reports of racial victimization across the grade levels may reflect success in reducing racists comments throughout the elementary school years.

Developmental Differences

Although there was only a modest increase in reports bullying across grades, there were other indications of decreasing concern for victims with development. With increasing age there was an increase in the tendency to join in, a decrease in willingness to help a victim, and a decrease in reports of peers' assisting victims. These developmental trends reflect the decreased concern for victims found in Rigby and Slee's (1991) Australian study. This trend must be considered in our efforts to intervene to reduce bullying. Perhaps interventions will be most successful if they are initiated in the early grades and maintained throughout the middle years of elementary school.

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Peer Involvement

We were concerned about peer involvement in bullying based on our observations that peers are present in 85% of bullying episodes both in the classroom and on the playground (Atlas & Pepler, 1997; Craig & Pepler, 1995). When asked about their peers' behaviours, 11% of students indicated that peers "almost always" tried to stop bullying when they saw it. This concurs with our observations on the playground.

Adult Intervention

Bullying is a covert activity which often goes undetected by adults due to many factors. Our observations indicated that teachers intervened in 4% of bullying episodes (Craig & Pepler, 1996). Children's reports reflect a somewhat higher rate of adult intervention. Approximately half of the bullies and victims had discussed the problem with teachers and parents. Bullies were more likely to be known to teachers, whereas victims were more likely to be known to parents.

Conclusion

Bullying is a pervasive problem among Canadian elementary school children. Almost a third of children acknowledge that they bully other students "one or twice" during a term and over a third of children report they are victimized with that frequency. Although this frequency of bullying and/or victimization does not suggest pathology, it may contribute to a negative climate within the school environment. The more frequent reports of bullying and victimization suggest a persistent and significant problem which may require focused intervention efforts.

Bullying needs to be addressed because of the potential long-term effects for all children who are involved, whether as bullies, victims, or witnesses to violence. As Cairns and Cairns (1991) note, aggressive children tend to affiliate with others who are aggressive, thereby increasing the likelihood of future delinquency and antisocial behaviour. Victims of serious violence have been found to be at risk for themselves perpetrating violence (APA report, 1993). Witnesses to violence may become desensitized to it and ultimately more accepting of it.

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Table 1

Description of Study Samples

Grade Range	Study	Location	Time of Pretest	Number of Schools	Number of Students
3 - 8	1	Toronto	Spring 1991	5	1247 620 boys/627 girls
1 - 6	2	Toronto	Fall 1992	3	905 464 boys/411 girls
5 - 8	3	Toronto	Fall 1995	7	1774 883 boys/890 girls
3 - 8	4	Kingston	Spring 1995	12	784 375 boys/409 girls

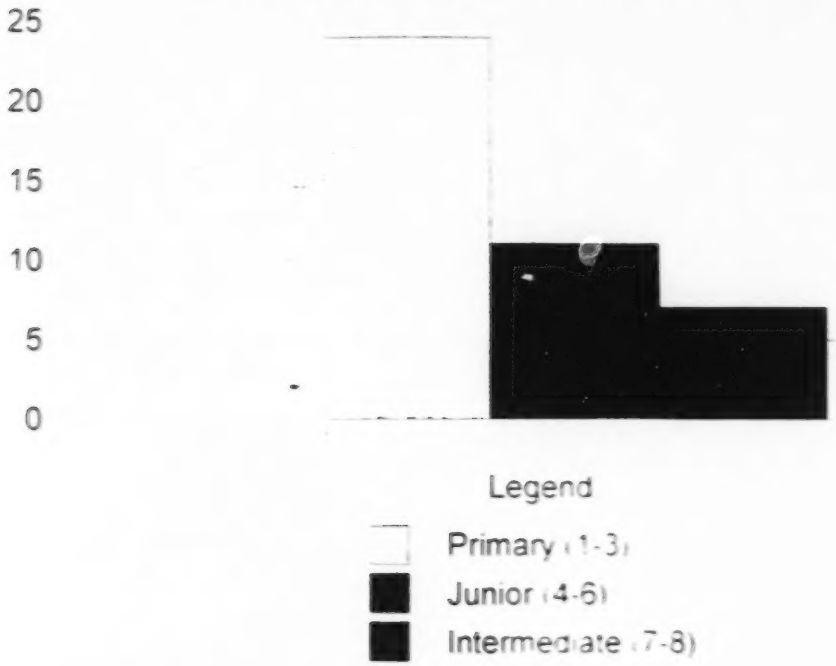
Table 2

Distribution of Students by Grade and Gender

Grade	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	Total
Boys	61	68	165	287	394	417	485	459	2336
Girls	54	71	169	274	408	440	472	519	2407
Total	115	139	334	561	802	857	957	978	4743

Developmental Differences:

Peers almost always intervene



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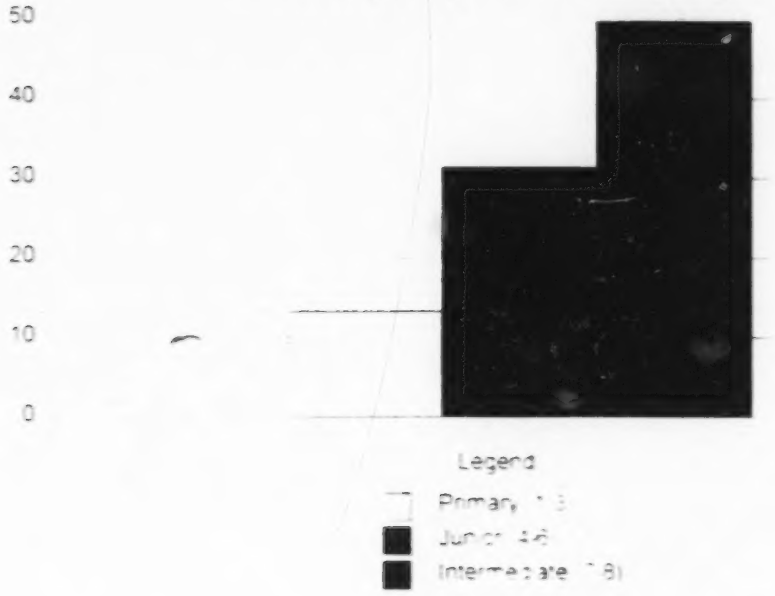
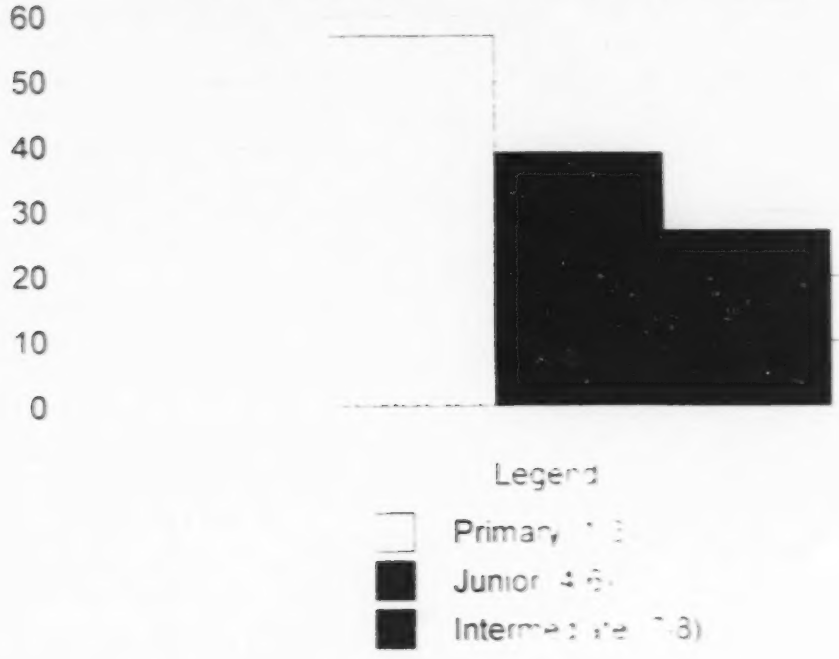
Developmental Differences:

Could you join in bullying?



Developmental Difference

Willingness to help victim.



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